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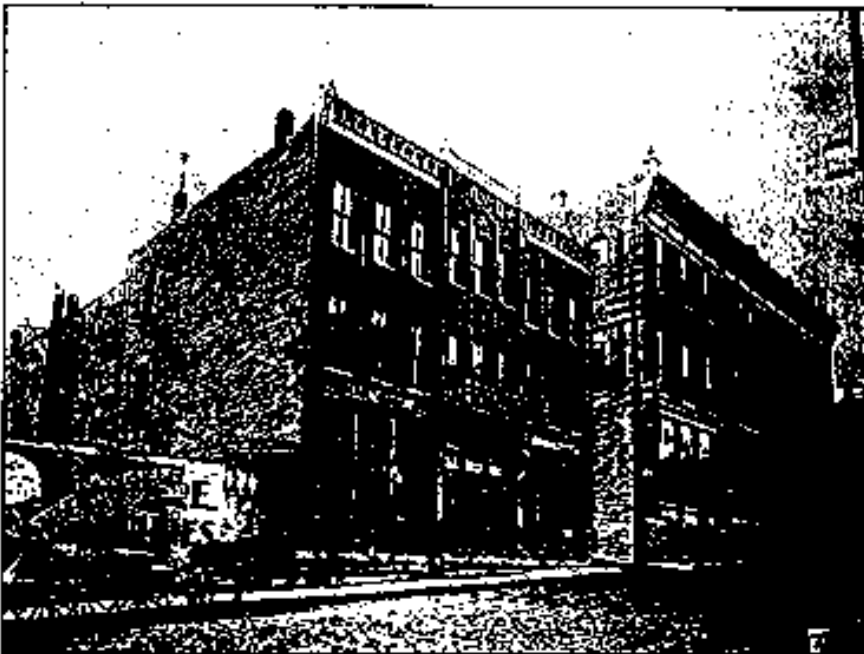
**MORE QUARRIES FROM  
LAST CHANCE GULCH**

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## **Behind Shrine's facade hide remains of an opulent theater**

*When first a Pilgrim to this town I came—  
A very fresh and tender-footed dame—  
A Bridge street cabin was the only stage  
Where Farce could roar, or Tragedy could rage;  
An earthen floor, the sides of unhewn logs,—  
We charged for men—admittance free for dogs,—  
Where tender love scenes in the tragic lay  
Were interrupted by the pack mule's bray,  
And the prima donna's warble clear  
On the high "C" and upper register,  
Was ruined by the Sunday auctioneer.*

**Recited by Katie Putnam, Ming Opera House  
dedication, 1880**



*The Ming Opera House on Jackson Street as it appeared in 1898.  
(Montana Hisotircal Society photo)*

The casual passerby would never guess that behind the splendid 1915 Egyptian Revival style facade of the Shrine Consistory Temple on Jackson Street lies the remains of a theater once nationally acclaimed. Few exterior traces of the 1880 design are apparent except for the original windows, visible on the two-story rear wing, which are proof of a previous identity. The nation's most talented performers graced the stage of the Ming Opera House including William Faversham, Dustin Farnum, William Frawley, John L. Sullivan, Eddie Foy, Otis Skinner, Marie Dressler as well as Katie Putnam and many, many others.

Wealthy cattleman John H. Ming, which epithet survives today as a local street name, financed the building of the opulent theater. It was by no means Helena's first, however. The Bridge Street Theatre, mentioned in the poem above, opened in 1865. The Wood Street Theatre opened in 1866 boasting three hundred seats, a drop curtain and coal lamp lighting. In 1870 the Langrishe Opera House established Helena as a cultural center, but it was destroyed in the fire of 1874. Helena lacked a theater until 1878 when a repertory troupe under the direction of J.A. Sawtelle remodeled Harmonia Hall on Broadway. Under the Sawtelles' management, Helena became the territorial capital of theater.

September 2, 1880, marked a new and even more illustrious era for regional theater with the opening of the Ming Opera House. This pretentious theater rivaled houses in larger cities like St. Paul and Portland as a stopping point for major stage celebrities en route to and from San Francisco. Under the skilled management of veteran actor John Maguire, Helena audiences enjoyed the best in dramatic and musical entertainment.

The interior of the \$20,000 theater, designed by Joseph Harvey, followed a circular plan modeled after fashionable European opera houses. It featured a 30-foot ceiling, gas lighting generated by a machine housed in a stone cellar, thirty-two seats of elaborate scenery, red leather seats, lavish

hand-painted curtains and elaborate draperies. State-of-the-art stage lighting included twenty-six footlights and thirty-six movable border lights supplied with gas by rubber tubes.

On that memorable opening night, elegantly attired Helenans paid \$1.25 for orchestra seats to see reigning theater queen Katie Putnam and the Hasenwinkle Dramatic Company perform "The Old Curiosity Shop." Gallery and box seats (the first installed in Montana) were filled and the theater was close to its 900-seat capacity. The beautiful Miss Putnam stepped forward dressed as the muse of tragedy and "abandoned her professional air." Already adored by her audience, she forever endeared herself to Helenans by reciting a lengthy poem written especially for the occasion.

At this time before the railroad had improved travel in the Territory, acting companies endured wearisome and often hazardous journeys to plan in the mining camps of the West. Helena was no exception. The arrival of Miss Putnam's company and other early-day performers, who came via steamboat to Fort Benton and then to Helena by state or wagon, won the hearts of early-day audiences in a way that could not be recaptured after the advent of the railroad.

The railroad eased the hardships of travel a few years later, but created a different problem. The *Herald* reported in 1887: "The practice of companies reaching the city 'just by the skin of their teeth,' or starting on the last train to meet an engagement, where the slightest delay would throw them late, is an injustice to the theatre-goers of Helena..." On this occasion the audience of 600 had waited almost an hour "on hard chairs in a crowded heated room" for the arrival of Louis DeLange of the Pyke Opera Company who had started from the East a day late.

The account of this delay came the same day headlines reported the "roasting alive" of over a hundred people in a crowded Exeter, England, theater. Clearly, said the *Herald*, "such a fate to hundreds of our own citizens was possible" given the Ming's inadequate single exit. (The danger posed not only by inadequate exits, but also by the close proximity of dozens of gas jets to voluminous skirts and flowing draperies seems not to have previously troubled patrons.)

*Today, the Consistory Temple's facade hides the building.*



No disaster occurred, but Ming determined to renovate his opera house installing ample exits, red plush seats, brass railings, red carpets, gold wallpaper and an electric device that controlled the gas lighting. An audience of 1,000 attended the grand reopen-

ing on October 31, 1887. According to critics, the Pyke Opera Company (whose tardy leading man had prompted public complaint) gave a mediocre performance.

After John Ming's death the following December, his theater continued to operate for several more decades. Into the twentieth century a new public, however, complained of its "wretched acoustics," uncomfortable seats and inadequate stage. The Ming's time of glory had obviously passed. Thanks to the efforts of the Consistory Shrine Temple Association which bought and renovated the building, the theater escaped the wrecking ball. Portions of the Ming's grand interior remain today, giving away one of Helena's best-kept secrets.

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